



(12) **EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION**

(43) Date of publication:
02.11.2016 Bulletin 2016/44

(51) Int Cl.:
B29C 65/06 ^(2006.01) *B29K 101/12* ^(2006.01)
B29K 105/06 ^(2006.01) *B29K 105/22* ^(2006.01)
B29K 309/08 ^(2006.01) *B29K 705/00* ^(2006.01)
B29K 705/02 ^(2006.01) *B29L 31/30* ^(2006.01)

(21) Application number: **16162565.2**

(22) Date of filing: **29.03.2016**

(84) Designated Contracting States:
AL AT BE BG CH CY CZ DE DK EE ES FI FR GB GR HR HU IE IS IT LI LT LU LV MC MK MT NL NO PL PT RO RS SE SI SK SM TR
 Designated Extension States:
BA ME
 Designated Validation States:
MA MD

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(30) Priority: **29.04.2015 DE 102015005407**

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(54) **FRICION STIR WELDING OF THERMOPLASTICS**

(57) A method according to the invention for manufacturing components comprises joining a first edge (101, 111) of a thermoplastic-containing first component part (100, 110, 120) and a second edge (201, 211) of a thermoplastic-containing second component part (200, 210, 220) to one another without any overlap. The first and the second edge are interconnected by friction stir welding. Friction stir welding involves rubbing a rotating friction stir welding pin (301, 311, 321) against at least one metal object (102, 112, 202, 212, 411).

A device according to the invention for connecting thermoplastic-containing component parts by friction stir welding comprises a base plate (400, 420) comprising at least one metal portion (421), which plate is designed to be in contact with joined component parts (120, 220) that are to be connected. The device further comprises a rotatable friction stir welding pin (321) which comprises a tip (323) and is designed to rub against the metal portion (421) of the base plate by means of the tip during friction stir welding.

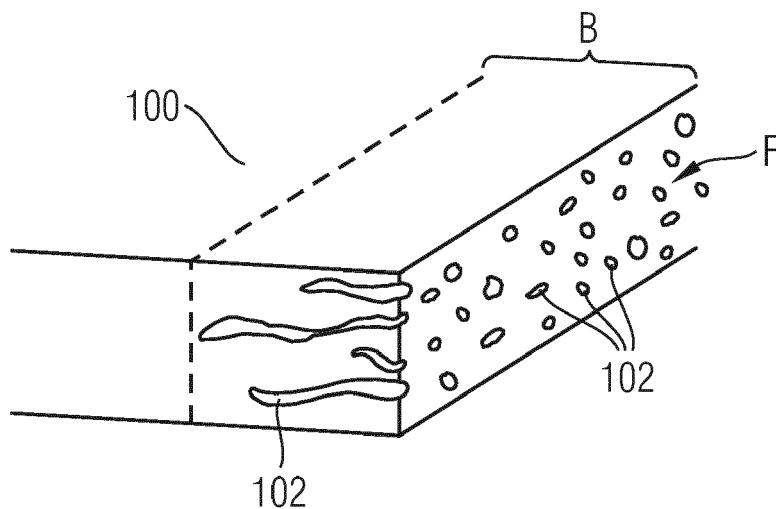


Fig. 1b

Description

[0001] The invention relates to a method for manufacturing components and to a device for connecting thermoplastic elements.

[0002] To manufacture components, it is often necessary to rigidly interconnect two or more component parts. If the material of the component parts is suitable, the friction stir welding technique may in particular be used; in this process, component parts are positioned on a base plate without any overlap. By means of a rotating pin, enough frictional heat is then generated in a joint region for the components to fuse together at this point.

[0003] The method is particularly suitable for component parts that have a relatively low melting point and good thermal conductivity. In particular, the method is suitable for connecting components made of light metal, such as aluminium or aluminium alloys.

[0004] However, using the method to connect plastics components, for example thermoplastic components, is problematic, in particular owing to the low thermal conductivity thereof. In order to still cause the material in the joint region to melt, the friction stir welding tool (in particular the pin thereof) and/or the thermoplastic parts to be joined are heated by means of a separate heat source.

[0005] For this purpose, induction heaters, infrared heaters, laser devices and/or heating plates or heating wires can be used.

[0006] However, incorporating additional heat sources of this type results in the method becoming more complex than a standard friction stir welding process. Furthermore, the additional heaters increase the complexity and the fault susceptibility of the machinery, and thus in particular increase the machinery and maintenance costs.

[0007] The problem addressed by the present invention is that of overcoming the above-mentioned drawbacks of friction stir welding thermoplastics.

[0008] The problem is solved by a method according to claim 1 and by a device according to claim 12. Preferred embodiments are disclosed in the dependent claims.

[0009] A method according to the invention for manufacturing components comprises joining (i.e. butt-joining) a first edge of a thermoplastic-containing first component part and a second edge of a thermoplastic-containing second component part to one another without any overlap; the component parts may for example be planar, flat or curved structural elements.

[0010] According to the method according to the invention, the first and the second component parts are interconnected by means of friction stir welding after having been joined to one another at their edges. Friction stir welding involves rubbing a rotating friction stir welding pin against at least one metal object.

[0011] A metal object of this type may in particular be incorporated into the first and/or second component part, for example in the form of one or more fibres, wires, fragments, balls and/or other bodies. Alternatively or additionally, a metal object of this type may form an inner or outer ply of a multi-layered arrangement in the first or second component part in the form of a foil or a metal sheet. In particular, the first component part or both component parts may contain a composite material which comprises thermoplastic material and the metal object(s).

[0012] Alternatively or additionally, the metal object (or one of the metal objects) may be contained in a base plate, on which the first and the second component part are joined to one another so as to rest thereon (e.g. lie thereon). In this case, the metal object preferably extends along all or part of the first edge (and the second edge joined thereto). In particular, the metal object may be planar, for example may itself form the base plate.

[0013] The rubbing may in particular take place by bringing the metal object into contact with a portion of the lateral surface of the friction stir welding pin (i.e. a side face of the cylindrical friction stir welding pin extending around the rotational axis) during rotation of said pin. Alternatively or additionally, the rubbing may be brought about by bringing the metal object into contact with the tip of the rotating friction stir welding pin.

[0014] In accordance with the method according to the invention, frictional heat is not only generated by bringing the rotating friction stir welding pin into contact with the thermoplastic material, but also by rubbing the friction stir welding pin against the metal object. The coefficient of friction between the metal object and the friction stir welding pin is greater than the coefficient of friction between the friction stir welding pin and the thermoplastic material in this case. Additional frictional heat is generated thereby, which spreads out owing to the good thermal conductivity of the metal in the metal object and in the friction stir welding pin. As a result, the surrounding and/or adjacent thermoplastic material is heated further and can thus be brought to a flow temperature without an additional heat source.

[0015] This principle also forms the basis for a device according to the invention for connecting thermoplastic-containing component parts by means of friction stir welding: a device of this type comprises a base plate having at least one metal portion, the base plate being designed to be in contact with joined component parts that are to be connected; in particular, the base plate may be designed to act as a support for joined component parts that are to be connected.

[0016] The device further comprises a rotatable friction stir welding pin which comprises a tip and is designed to rub against the metal portion of the base plate by means of its tip during friction stir welding.

[0017] The metal portion may for example be a strip incorporated into a base plate or a planar portion of the base

plate, or may be the entire base plate. It may be made of steel or iron, for example.

5 **[0018]** A method according to the invention and a device according to the invention thus make it possible to butt-weld thermoplastic-containing components to one another without an additional heat source being involved. In comparison with other materials, thermoplastic-containing components of this type are easy to shape and have a low density, which is why they are advantageous for many uses (for example in the field of transport construction, in particular aircraft construction). The fact that the present invention makes it possible to omit an additional heat source results in a welding process that is simpler than conventional friction stir welding of thermoplastics and in the use of more cost-effective, robust and user-friendly systems engineering.

10 **[0019]** Furthermore, in accordance with the method according to the invention, the different plies of component parts of this type, in which thermoplastic material and sheet metal or metal foil are laminated, can be synchronously interconnected. This results in an advantage compared with conventional manufacturing of multi-layered components, in which only thin sheet-metal parts are welded to one another, the thermoplastic material then being laminated thereon or therebetween: this approach is complex and therefore expensive, and for certain dimensions or shapes it is even impossible, in particular because the large, thin and thus non-dimensionally stable thin metal sheets that result from the welding are difficult to position.

15 **[0020]** Lastly, metal objects that are potentially contained in the first and second component parts are interconnected using the method according to the invention. These connections may advantageously act as a means for stabilising the weld seam.

20 **[0021]** The first and the second edge can thus be connected using a friction stir welding tool which has not been pre-heated and/or which is not connected to a heat source. In particular, the friction stir welding pin may be at ambient temperature at the start of the connection process.

25 **[0022]** According to a preferred embodiment, the friction stir welding pin consists of metal at least in part (for example iron or steel). A metal of this type preferably has a higher melting point than the material or materials of the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part. Owing to its good thermal conductivity, a friction stir welding pin of this type is suitable for distributing the frictional heat, which is generated by rubbing said pin against the metal object or metal portion, over its lateral surface and thus melting the materials of the adjacent first and second edges. A metal friction stir welding pin of this type may be provided with a coating which may comprise ceramic material, for example.

30 **[0023]** According to a preferred embodiment of a method according to the invention, a tip of the friction stir welding pin rubs against the metal object (or against at least one of the metal objects) during friction stir welding. Here, the metal object may be part of a base plate on which the first and the second edge are joined to one another so as to rest thereon.

35 **[0024]** While, in conventional friction stir welding processes for connecting metals, the tip of the welding tool pin is guided over a base plate at a distance of a few tenths of a millimetre in order to prevent the base plate from fusing to the metal components to be connected, according to said embodiment for the friction stir welding of thermoplastic-containing material, contact between the base plate and the friction stir welding pin is deliberately used to generate frictional heat.

[0025] In this process, the melting point of the metal object of the (or in the) base plate is preferably lower than the melting point of the thermoplastic material, and therefore the thermoplastic-containing component parts can be prevented from fusing with this metal object, and frictional heat is nevertheless generated in the metal and utilised (as described).

40 **[0026]** Alternatively or additionally - in order to prevent the metal portion of the base plate from fusing with the thermoplastic material - the tip of the friction stir welding pin and/or the metal object (all or part thereof, e.g. along a weld seam to be produced), or even the entire base plate, can be coated with a separation layer. The separation layer is preferably made of a material that is abrasion-resistant and/or thermally conductive and/or has a higher melting point than the thermoplastic material; ceramic material is particularly suitable, for example.

45 **[0027]** As a result, it is possible to detach the component without any losses after connecting the first edge to the second edge using the friction stir welding process.

[0028] A preferred embodiment of a method according to the invention comprises a step of detaching the interconnected first and second component parts from the base plate.

50 **[0029]** In particular, a method according to the invention and a device according to the invention include embodiments according to which two thermoplastic-containing component parts, which do not contain any metal (e.g. two component parts which only consist of (optionally glass-reinforced) thermoplastic material), are interconnected using friction stir welding without an additional heat source: the heat required for melting the thermoplastic material is (in addition to rubbing the tip against the thermoplastic components) generated by rubbing the tip of the rotating friction stir welding pin against the base plate (or the metal object that said plate comprises).

55 **[0030]** The first and the second component parts are preferably planar in this case and each have a thickness of at most 10 mm, preferably 1 mm to 5 mm. This thickness allows the frictional heat which is generated by the rotating friction stir welding pin rubbing against the base plate (or against the metal portion or metal object that said plate comprises) to advantageously spread out in the component parts.

[0031] According to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the first component part comprises a welding

surface (i.e. a surface which, according to the method, is connected to a welding surface of the second edge (of the second component part)), of which 10 % to 40 %, more preferably 20 % to 30 %, is formed by one or more surfaces of the at least one metal object. These surface percentages ensure a particularly good ratio between the thermoplastic material to be fused and the metal generating frictional heat, by means of which ratio sufficient heat for connecting the two component parts is thus generated, and also the energy consumption is kept as low as possible.

[0032] An advantageous embodiment of a method according to the invention comprises - before said edges are joined to one another without any overlap - inserting the at least one metal object into the thermoplastic-containing first component part on the first edge thereof. In this process, the thermoplastic material may be in a heated, soft state. Alternatively, the method may comprise driving the at least one metal object into the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part in a solid state, for example by pressing in or boring in the metal object (or metal objects) in the form of pins, spikes, points or strips, preferably from a welding surface on the first edge.

[0033] Alternatively or additionally, the method may comprise applying the at least one metal object in the form of a metal layer to the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part.

[0034] In this way, the first and the second thermoplastic-containing component part may only be equipped with the metal object(s) that is/are advantageous for welding according to the invention after they have been manufactured.

[0035] According to a preferred embodiment, the metal object or at least one of the metal objects comprises a light metal, such as aluminium and/or an aluminium alloy. This material has particularly good thermal conductivity. Furthermore, compared with other metals, aluminium has a particularly low density, and therefore components having a relatively low weight can be manufactured.

[0036] According to an advantageous variant of a method according to the invention, the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part is free of metal at a distance of 2 cm, preferably at a distance of 1 cm, more preferably at a distance of 0.5 cm, from the first edge and the second edge, respectively. In this case, the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part thus comprises metal only in a peripheral region on the first and second edge, respectively, while it otherwise consists of one or more other materials, for example solely of thermoplastic material.

Although the use of the metal in the region of the edges can thus be used to generate frictional heat and can thus be used for an advantageous welding process as described above, possible disadvantageous effects of the metal (which may result from the electrical conductivity or the weight of the metal, depending on the intended use of the component to be manufactured) can be minimised or even avoided by excluding the metal in regions remote from the edges.

[0037] According to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a method according to the invention is used for manufacturing a shell element for the fuselage region of an aircraft and/or of a freight container, for example an air-freight container. In this way, a large shell element of this type or a large freight container of this type can be manufactured in a simple manner from a thermoplastic-containing and thus light and easily shapeable material, while avoiding the need for an additional heat source during welding.

[0038] In the following, preferred embodiments of the invention are described in greater detail with reference to drawings. It is clear that individual elements and components can also be combined in manners different to those shown.

[0039] In the schematic drawings:

Fig. 1a shows an implementation of a method according to the invention in accordance with an exemplary embodiment;

Fig. 1b is a view of a welding surface of an exemplary component part;

Fig. 2 is a cross section through an exemplary embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 shows a use of an exemplary embodiment of a device according to the invention in cross section.

[0040] Fig. 1a is a schematic perspective view of an arrangement during manufacture of a component according to an embodiment of a method according to the invention. The arrangement comprises a first component part 100 having a first edge 101 which is joined to a second edge 201 of a second component part without any overlap (i.e. butt-joined) on a base plate 400.

[0041] In the example shown, the component parts 100, 200 are designed as cuboid planks; it is clear that the present invention is not limited to the connection of component parts having this shape. In particular, the component parts may comprise curved, non-linear portions and/or may be different from one another.

[0042] The first and the second component part are each made of a thermoplastic-containing material, into which metal objects 102, 202 in the form of metal fibres are incorporated around the edges in a region B_1 and B_2 , respectively. Outside the regions B_1 and B_2 , for example at a distance of 1 cm, more preferably at a distance of 0.5 cm, from the first and the second edge 101, 201, respectively, the first and the second component part are each free of metal.

[0043] A friction stir welding device 300 (shown schematically and only in portions in the figure) comprising a rotating friction stir welding pin 301 is guided in the direction of the arrow along the joined edges 101, 201; in the process, the

end of the rotating friction stir welding pin 301 closest to the base plate 400 penetrates between the first and the second edge (not visible in the figure), such that its lateral surface rubs against the welding surfaces of the first and second edges that are to be connected, and in particular against the metal objects 102, 202; here, the coefficient of friction between the metal object and the friction stir welding pin is greater than the coefficient of friction between the friction stir welding pin and the thermoplastic material in the component parts 100, 200.

[0044] As a result, both the metal objects and the thermoplastic material surrounding said objects melt at the edges 101, 201, so that the edges run into one another. This produces a welded connection 500 between the first and second component parts 100, 200, without the friction stir welding pin 301 or the component parts 100, 200 being additionally heated.

[0045] Fig. 1b shows a component part 100 corresponding to the first component part 100 from Fig. 1a such that a welding surface F is visible on the edge 101. According to a preferred embodiment, the percentage of the surface formed by the metal objects 102 in the surface F is 10 % to 40 %, more preferably 20 % to 30 %.

[0046] Fig. 2 is a schematic cross section through an exemplary embodiment of the present invention. In this figure, a rotating friction stir welding pin 311 penetrates between a first edge 111 and second edge 211 of a thermoplastic-containing first and second component part 110, 210, which are joined to one another on a base plate 410. The first component part 110 and the second component part 210 each comprise metal objects 112, 212 which are inserted into the thermoplastic-containing material in the form of layers; it is clear that, alternatively, there may be more or fewer metal layers than the three example metal layers in the component parts.

[0047] In particular, the metal objects may comprise aluminium, for example; according to a preferred variant, the first and/or second component part comprises glass-reinforced aluminium (what is known as "GLARE").

[0048] According to the invention, the first and the second edge 111, 211 are interconnected by means of friction stir welding. In the process, the rotating friction stir welding pin 311 rubs against the metal objects 112, 212, in particular in the rubbing regions denoted by R in the figure. The frictional heat thus generated, which is schematically shown in the figure spreading out in dashed semi-circles, makes it possible to fuse the first edge 111 to the second edge 211 without it being necessary to additionally heat the friction stir welding pin 311 or the component parts 110, 210.

[0049] The friction stir welding pin 311 is supported by a shoulder 312, which preferably remains stationary, i.e. does not rotate, so that (almost) no frictional heat is generated in the regions of contact between the shoulder and the first and second component parts. As a result, fusion of material outside the welding surfaces of the edges can be reduced, and thus a neater weld seam can be produced. The tip of the friction stir welding pin is guided over the base plate without contact in the embodiment shown in Fig. 2.

[0050] Fig. 3 shows both an implementation of an embodiment of a method according to the invention and a device according to the invention in accordance with an exemplary embodiment in use. The device comprises a base plate 420 having a metal portion 421; alternatively, the metal portion could also be the entire base plate. In particular, the metal portion having the reference signs used in this document represents a metal object.

[0051] The device further comprises a friction stir welding tool comprising a friction stir welding pin 321 which is held in a shoulder 322; in accordance with that set out above, the shoulder preferably remains stationary during friction stir welding, i.e. does not rotate together with the friction stir welding pin 321.

[0052] In the situation shown in Fig. 3, the friction stir welding pin 321 penetrates between a first component part 120 and a second component part 220 joined thereto without any overlap, and specifically to the extent that its tip 323 rubs against the metal portion 421 during friction stir welding. The frictional heat thus generated makes it possible to weld the first component part 120 to the second component part 220. Said component parts may in particular be free of (additional) metal objects in this case, for example they may be a pure thermoplastic material or a glass-reinforced thermoplastic material. Preferably, the first and the second component part 120, 220 are planar and have a thickness D of at most 1 cm, preferably of from 1mm to 5 mm.

[0053] In order for it to be easier to detach the component parts that have been welded together, in the embodiment shown the metal portion 421 of the base plate 420 is provided with a separation layer. This layer may in particular comprise a ceramic material. Alternatively or additionally, the tip 323 and/or the lateral surface of the friction stir welding pin 321 could be coated with a separation layer of this type.

List of reference signs

[0054]

100, 110, 120	first component part
101, 111	first edge
102, 112, 202, 212, 421	metal object
200, 210, 220	second component part
201, 211	second edge

	300	friction stir welding device
	301, 311, 321	friction stir welding pin
	323	tip of a friction stir welding pin
	400, 410, 420	base plate
5	421	metal portion
	422	separation layer or coating
	500	weld seam
	B ₁ , B ₂	region comprising metal objects
	D	thickness of component parts
10	F	welding surface on the first edge
	R	rubbing regions

Claims

- 15
1. Method for manufacturing components, which comprises:
- 20 joining a first edge (101, 111) of a thermoplastic-containing first component part (100, 110, 120) and a second edge (201, 211) of a thermoplastic-containing second component part (200, 210, 220) to one another without any overlap; and
- 25 connecting the first and the second edge by means of friction stir welding;
- characterised in that**
- friction stir welding involves rubbing a rotating friction stir welding pin (301, 311, 321) against at least one metal object (102, 112, 202, 212, 411).
2. Method according to claim 1, wherein the metal object comprises at least one wire incorporated into the first and/or second component part and/or at least one fibre (102, 202) incorporated into the first and/or second component part.
- 30 3. Method according to either claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the first component part (110) and/or the second component part (210) contains a multi-layered composite material, in which the metal object (112, 212) is coated at least in portions with a thermoplastic-containing material.
- 35 4. Method according to any of the preceding claims, wherein, during friction stir welding, a tip (323) of the friction stir welding pin rubs against a base plate (400, 420) which comprises the metal object (411) and on which the first and the second edge are joined to one another so as to rest thereon.
- 40 5. Method according to claim 4, wherein the metal object (411) and/or the friction stir welding pin are coated with a separation layer (412) at least in part.
6. Method according to any of the preceding claims, which additionally comprises detaching the interconnected first and second component parts from the base plate (400, 410, 420).
- 45 7. Method according to any of the preceding claims, wherein, on the first edge (101, 111), the first component part (100, 110, 120) comprises a welding surface (F), of which 10 % to 40 %, more preferably 20 % to 30 %, is formed by one or more surfaces of the at least one metal object (102, 112, 202, 212).
- 50 8. Method according to any of the preceding claims, which additionally comprises, before the step of joining without any overlap, driving the metal object (102, 112, 202, 212) into the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part; and/or applying the metal object in the form of a metal layer to the thermoplastic-containing first and/or second component part.
- 55 9. Method according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the first and/or the second component part is free of metal at a distance of 1 cm, preferably at a distance of 0.5 cm, from the first edge (101) and the second edge (201), respectively.

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10. Method according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the components are or comprise shell elements for the fuselage region of aircraft and/or air-freight containers.

5 **11.** Method according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the friction stir welding pin (301, 311, 321) has not been pre-heated before connecting the first and the second edge.

12. Device for connecting thermoplastic-containing component parts by means of friction stir welding, which comprises:

10 a base plate (400, 420) comprising at least one metal portion (421), wherein the base plate is designed to be in contact with joined component parts (120, 220) that are to be connected; and
a rotatable friction stir welding pin (321) which comprises a tip (323) and is designed to rub against the metal portion (421) of the base plate by means of the tip during friction stir welding.

15 **13.** Device according to claim 12, wherein the friction stir welding pin (321) and/or the metal portion (421) comprises a coating (422) at least in part.

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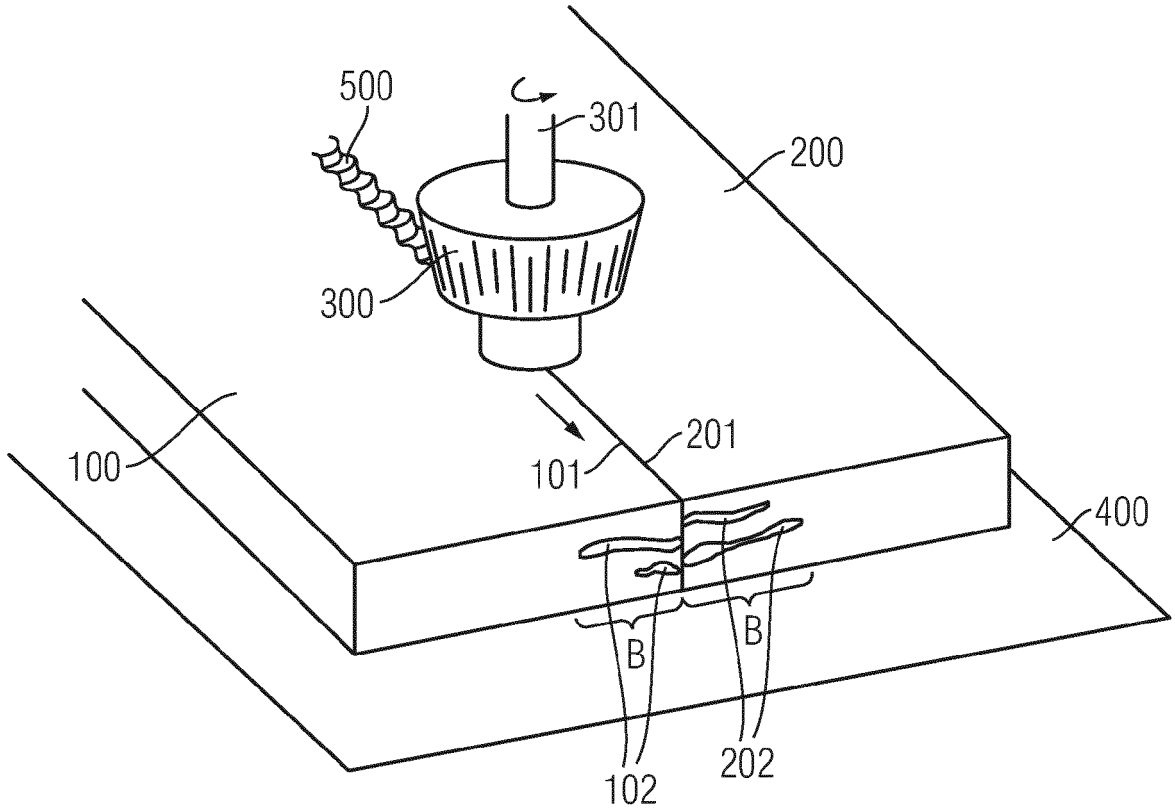


Fig. 1a

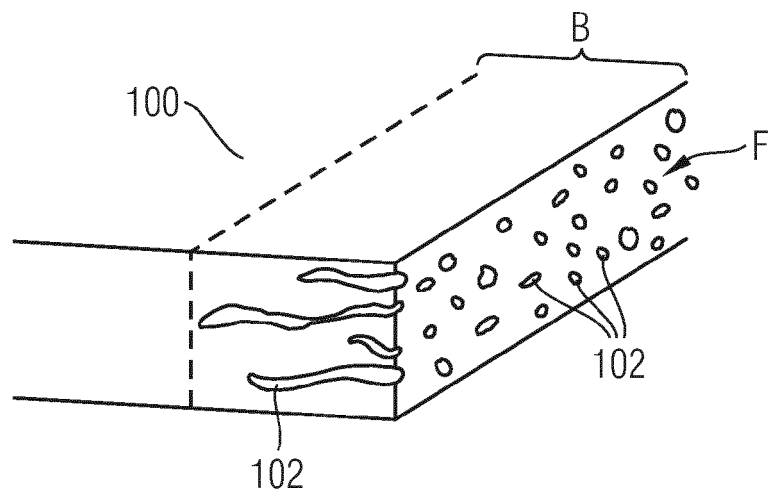


Fig. 1b

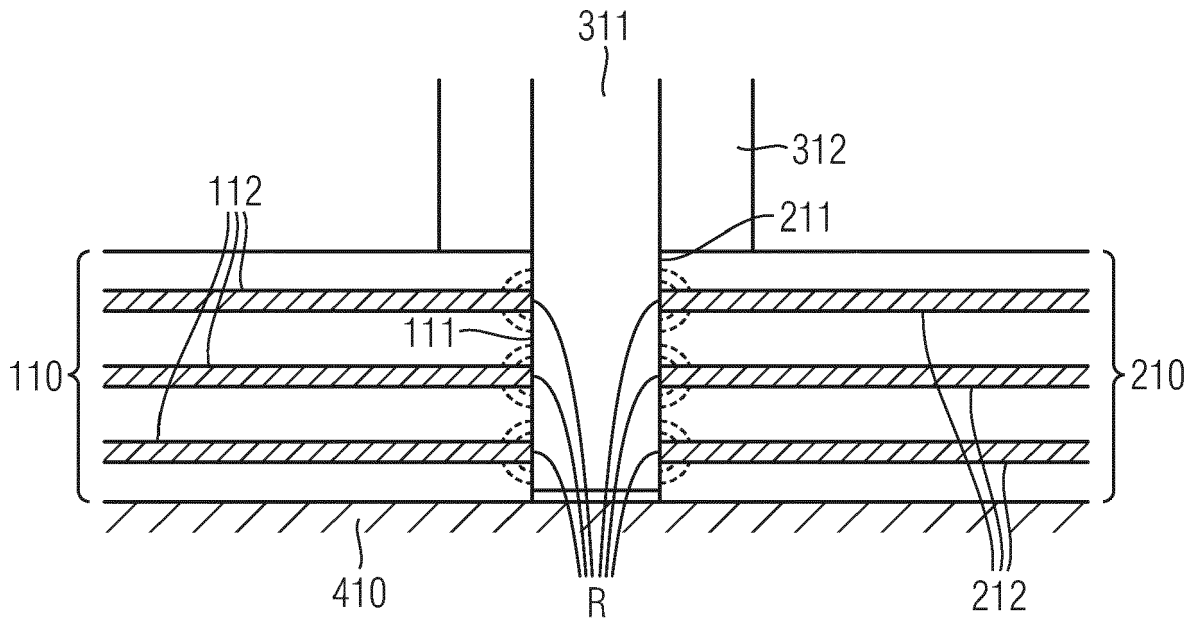


Fig. 2

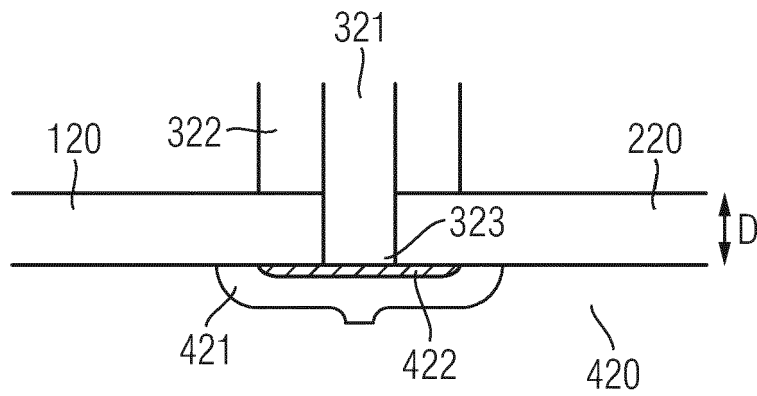


Fig. 3



EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 16 16 2565

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The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
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CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document			

EPO FORM 1503 03/02 (P04C01)

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